

SEIDHR, A SCHOLARLY STUDY OF THE ART

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Seidhr was expressed as the magical art that gives the most power and might. The Seidhr-tradition is attached to two archetypal beings: the god of Wisdom: Oden (Odinn) and the witch-goddess Freja (Freyja). Seidhr is The Way of Knowledge, in where to research (intellectual work) and use (intuitive work). Through these ways of learning the magician gained a visionary spirituality.

The most extensive study of Seidhr can though be found in Dag Strömbäcks dissertation *Sejd: Textstudier i nordisk religionshistoria* (Lund, 1935). Strömbäck defines Seidhr as [my translation]

... a sort of primitive magic, intended to either damage to a certain person (destroying s.) [black seidhr] or gain of knowledge about the future of people, coming weather conditions, year's crops etc. (divinatory s.) [white seidhr]." [Strömbäck: *Kulturhistoriskt lexikon för nordisk medeltid*, Malmö, 1970].

The terms "black" and "white" are also found in Siberian shamanism, and there are also instances where the same shaman is both "black" and "white" (cf. Eliade: *Enc. of Rel.* vol.13; *Shamanism*, New York, 1987). But Strömbäck makes one interesting note; the black (or destructive) seidhr seems to have been directed "mot människans sjäsliv och andliga förmögenheter", translated: "towards man's spiritual life and spiritual powers". It seems to among other, Strömbäck remarks, to have call forth anxiety, longing, restlessness and melancholy. Strömbäcks definition could though be seen as one-sided because it does not consider mythological conceptions and that seidhr was a part of a bigger religious system.

Another scholar, Folke Ström describe seidhr as [my translation]:

Seidhr-magic is far more complicated than the pure magic of thoughts. It psychological suppositions is however the same: seidhr is based upon the conception of the souls working at distance, its potential possibility to emancipate from the body and in a materialized figure make its actors will and intent set to work. Seidhr required a well-developed technique, grounded in purely professional skill and experience. It was consequently practiced by skilled and educated men or women. Women are most spoken about in relation to the art of Seidhr..."

[Folke Ström: *Nordisk Hedendom*, Arlöv; 1985]

Most of the magicians were women and seidhr was on principle regarded as a feminine art (in myth this is expressed as Freja as the one who taught the art of Seidhr, to Oden). The men that engaged in the art of Seidhr were considered unmanly, perverts, and were looked upon with disregard. These men were described as afflicted with ergi, "angry-ness" (behind this expression lies the thought that seidhr (womanliness) was something for a man so offensive, a women-sexual disposition). It seems to be that the male seidhr was equal to a passive homosexual individual. Folke Ström writes (in *Nordisk*

Hedendom, Arlöv; 1985) that in old-northern views there were a difference between active and passive sexuality - it was foremost the one that played the feminine role in a homosexual relationship that were looked upon with disgust and were disregarded. Those familiar with Jungian psychology and the process of individuation (anima/animus) will probably find the above interesting, as well as those who ascribe "homo-/bi-sexuality" to Set.

In a lecture on moral in old Norse (Nid, ergi and Old Norse moral attitudes; Edinburgh, 1974) Ström expressed that ergi, like the adjective argr (from which it is formed) has pejorative sense - no other Norse word was able to provoke such violent feelings and reactions. In old Norse the application to a man of the term argr meant that he was "unmanly" - in particular that he was a coward and a homosexual. The noun ergi when used about women is synonymous with nymphomania (which was despised in a woman as unmanliness was in a man). The sexual component in ergi refers chiefly to passive homosexual behavior -- implying that the person accused took the woman's part which are classified as criminal in the law texts. In no case is there any question of an accusation based on active homosexual behaviour, according to Ström. Ergi is in the early Germanic society according to Ström the female nature of the argr man, "a nature which could manifest itself either through female sexual propensities or through a lack of manly courage. It cannot be doubted that it is the idea of 'unmanliness' in both its physical and its mental sense which lies at the centre of the ergi complex and permeates its whole semantic field". It is the female nature and role which are significant and these comprehend not only the obvious sexual element (with characteristics such as childbirth) but also certain mental qualities and duties considered female, according to Ström. The sexual emphasis is very interesting and it could have been some sexual-magic woven into this. This is not very unlikely since there are references of a sex-magic relationship between Odhinn (Odr) and Freyja.

The Seidhr-women was called vala or völva, and the word völva is supposed to hold the meaning: "the woman that carries the staff" (volva; volr=staff). This (staff) was the basic equipment of the völva (serving as a symbol of power), other equipment was the hood which probably were used to obtain necessary concentration. This description have some in common with what Siberian shamans wear (see Eliade: Enc. of Rel. vol.13; Shamanism).

The clothing of a völva is described in Eirik rödes saga (translated by Strömbäck); [my translation]:

she wore a blue cloak tied together with straps, which was braided with stones all the way down to the flaps. Around her neck she wore pearls of glass and on the head a black lamb-fur hood, which was foddered with white fur of a cat. In the hand she had a staff furnished with a button. This staff was embellished with brass and braided with stones on the top, around the button. Around her waist she had a belt of tinderswamp on which a big leather purse hang. In this she kept the witchcraft instruments which she needed for the practice of her art. On her feet she had hairy calfskin-shoes with long and strong straps, i which ends were balls of brass. On the hands she had gloves of catskin, which on the

inside was white and hairy ... She had a spoon of brass and a knife of brass furnished with one handle of walrus tooth tied together by two rings; the point of the knife was broken".

Eirik rödes saga should though to be handled carefully since it could not (scholarly) be seen as a direct source of Seidhr (it does not say that the völva goes into ecstasy). One interesting point could be made; in Eiriks rödes saga the völva is wearing skin of a cat (cf. Snorre Sturlusson, Snorres Edda: Gylfaginning; 23, where Freyja rides a cat-cart).

The Seidhrhiallr (mentioned in Gisla Saga, Laxdöla, Hrolfs saga, Frithiofs saga, Gongu-Hrolfs saga etc.) was probably a stool or a wooden construction. There has been some controversy whether the Seidhr has been practiced outdoors or indoors, and there are accounts for both of them (most likely outdoors). The Seidhrhiallr was supposed to outdistance the world around - the magician being separate from the world around. While sitting on the Seidhrhiallr the magician was surrounded by helpers (who were drumming - on the seidhrdrum, called lock - or/and sang - the power song called vardlokkur (has been mentioned as galdr) - that would help her/him - sometimes also the helpers - to get into ecstasy). The singing seems to have been something characteristic for Seidhr - there are a line of kenningar for struggle/combat, where the originating word is rodd, songr, galdr, messa and so on, and it seems like one has reconciled the alarm of the weapons with the voice of the human being. A galdr-song is usually describes as "gala" and "sygja" (to crow, to call and to sing). It seems like the word among the poets have had the meaning of song, but this does not mean that the word in its oldest form had this meaning. It is uncertain that the singing during the Seidhr is the same technique as galdr - though it is most likely to be the same - they are only used in different contexts. It has been suggested that vardlokkur was a special kind of galdr used for seidhr. Galdr was given by Odhinn as a gift to mankind. In ancient times both men and women practiced it. It has in Northern literature been suggested that by galdr means a rhythmic singing that affect the mind, or the mind and the surroundings. Galdr function through a rhythmic repetition of certain powerful syllables. Galdr (singing) is conducted as one let the melody free and easy grow by itself, and let the voice become rough, tempting and loud shouting in one own way of expression. The Roman general Jualianus Apostata described galdr, when he stayed among Germanic people in the year 360, as "wild songs, performed in a way that most were similar to those birds who call rough/harsh". Strömbäck describes Seidhr as [my translation];

"the exerciser is sitting on the seidrhiallr surrounded by a circle [standing below the seidrhiallr in a circle] of singing helpers, which powerfully contribute to bring the seidhr into ecstasy; with the full ecstasy's entrance -- when the body lies there lifeless, and when according to primitive belief the soul makes its travel fraught with danger to the kingdom of the dead or to foreign countries, appear one with special knowledge talented helper and sing vardlokkur, i.e. the attract-songs, which are to help "vården" [the soul] home again and take it back to its bodily abode."

(Strömbäck; *Sejd: Textstudier i nordiskreligionshistoria*; Lund, 1935).

According to Strömbäck the ceremony on the Seidrhiallr was to help the shaman to "leave" his body and go on a soul-journey to the under- or overworld. It seems that

Seidhr have been in close relationship to hamnskifte; shift of guise. Hamnskifte, or förhamning, mean that the soul takes the form of an animal gestalt or a lesser human, or demonic gestalt, which reminds of the person. The word hamn (hamr) hold the meaning of the human "hamn" or the soul that was supposed to be able to leave the body. This can be compared with hugr which hold the meaning of the soul, or being, which where considered to be able to release from the body and in material gestalt act (of his/her own). Not all where able to shift guise, only those with knowledge in the art of magic or those with inborn psychic qualities. Those with skill could take any animal gestalt they liked, others only the guise of the animal, which the person was associated directly with -- it's fylgja or vörd.

Strömbäcks argument for seidhr as ecstatic is depending on his idea that seidhr and hamnskifte are in close relationship. Strömbäck argument about the origin of said is as follows [my translation]:

The Lappish witchcraft became the greatest, and when it among the northerners also were plenty of favorer and practitioners of witchcraft was it simply natural that it obtain footing also among them".

(Strömbäck; Sejd: Textstudier i nordiskreligionshistoria; Lund, 1935).

Ström follows Strömbäck in the essential parts; that seidhr is of Lappish origin as well as seeing seidhr as ecstatic as well as related to hamnskifte. Another view is presented by Ohlmarks [my translation]: "Seid. The especially Nordic form of heathen shamanism. The art of seid has not been borrowed from the high arctic Lapp 'real' shamanism, with drum-dance and cataleptic trance, but it has been developed from a - most likely Scythian-Sarmatic - southeastern subarctic 'small-time-shamanism'."

Ohlmarks argue that there are no relation between hamnskifte and seidhr. Seidhr was often used to read in the memory of nature, the akasha chronicle, and to see what karmic forces that lead to a man's current life situation Seidhr is not of ecstatic character because the seidhr couldn't go on "soul travels". On the journey the seidhr met guardian spirits, helping spirits (the Swedish word for this ("hjälpande" ; hjälp/ is help, /ande is spirit/soul) has a dual meaning; "helping" and "Spirit of help"), teachers, and other spirits and being of which some were friendly while others were "destroyers". It is up to the shaman to reach such a skill that he can deal with these spirits and being untroubled. The guardian spirit is called fylgja and could have the figure of man or a women - depending on the seidhr magician. A seidhr-man will have a fylgja represented by a women and a seidhr-women a man as fylgja (compare with Jung's Anima/Animus). Ohlmarks uses the categories "higharted"/"greater" shamanism and "subartic"/"lesser" shamanism which only is a bad plagiary of the former. The subartic (lesser) shamanism is only imitating ecstasy (i.e. no real "soultravels"). It is to this category Ohlmarks suggest that seidhr belongs to. When the sources tell about what could be a "soul travel" it is actually referring to that a guardian spirit travel to do the seidhrs commission. The singing are to call helping-spirits to inspire the seidhr and through this gain answers of questions. Ström and Strömbäck differ from Ohlmarks, as well each other concerning the singing. Strömbäck argue that it should be used to orient the soul back to the body. Ström understands the song to be used to attract spirits (help-spirits) to facilitate the seidhr.

Ohlmarks presentation is though full of contradictions since he refers to Lokasenna where Loke accuse Odhinn for being unmanly and practicing seidhr. It is said that Odhinn traveled around the world as a mage (Lokasenna:24) with no mention of the ecstasy. Another contradiction is that he refers to Ynglingasaga (ch.7) where Odhinn lies as dead when his hamn is travelling all around the world. Ohlmarks does however suggest that seidhr is not of Lappish origin because the Lappish and Germanic culture was so different, and seidhr demonstrate to few similarities. The seidhrhiallr show, according to Ohlmarks, that it could not be "greater shamanism" since it is only in "lesser shamanism" a chair is used by the Siberian shamans (in Studien zum Problem des Schamanismus, Lund 1939).

Eliade, who in much follows Ohlmarks (actually the only one I have found that does), state that the ritual-costume (as well as importance of music and ecstasy) of seidhr binds it to "classical shaman-seance". The described "soul travels" are though to be considered as less important. Eliade suggest that seidhr is not necessarily to be considered as shamanism when mystical flight is a motif in all magic, especially European witchcraft. For Eliade is it the divinatory aspect of seidhr that is constitutive and by this seidhr belongs to lesser magic (see Eliade: Enc. of Rel. vol.13; Shamanism).

Summary of views presented:

seidhr	Strömbäck	Ström	Ohlmarks	Eliade
origin	lappish shamanism	lappish shamanism	subarctic "lesser" shamanism	not convinced that it is shamanism
character	ecstatic w/ elements of soultravels and hamnskifte	ecstatic w/ elements of soultravels and hamnskifte	inspiratory not hamnskifte because it isn't the soul but the guardian spirit that travels	inspiratory
dominating element	soultravel (greater magic)	soultravel (greater magic)	divinatory (lesser magic)	divinatory (lesser magic)
singing	guiding used to guide the soul back to the body	attracting used to attract guardian spirits to guide and guard the soul during the travel	calling to call helping-spirits to inspire the seidhr and through this gain answers of questions	(n/a)
music	promoting ecstasy	promoting ecstasy	(n/a)	(n/a)